

February 4, 2002: Commission Urges President Bush to Raise Religious-Freedom Issues With Pakistani Leader

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent federal agency advising the Administration and Congress, wrote to President Bush January 31 to urge him to raise religious-freedom issues with Pakistani President Musharraf during the latter's upcoming visit to Washington. The Commission noted the progress Pakistan has made on issues the Commission drew attention to in its May 1, 2001 Annual Report - including abolition of the discriminatory system of separate electorates for religious minorities and President Musharraf's efforts to foster an atmosphere of religious tolerance in Pakistan. "The Commission also views with approval the Administration's decision to assist Pakistan's efforts to improve its education system in order to ensure that religious schools are not breeding grounds for the recruitment and training of future terrorists," wrote Commission Chair Michael K. Young. At the same time, the Commission updated its recommendations regarding Pakistan, asking President Bush to press the Pakistani leader to change the way the country's blasphemy law is implemented, in order to "limit and eventually eliminate the numerous instances of their wrongful use against members of minority religious communities and Muslims alike," and to tackle persecution of the Ahmadi minority and continued sectarian violence. The text of the letter follows: January 31, 2002 Dear Mr. President: The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, pursuant to its advisory responsibilities under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), respectfully urges you to raise religious-freedom concerns with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf during his upcoming visit to Washington. The Commission has examined carefully religious freedom in Pakistan. In September 2000, the Commission held a public hearing on religious freedom and U.S. policy in Pakistan. In December 2000, Commission staff visited Pakistan and met with government officials, representatives of religious communities, human rights monitors, and U.S. and third-country diplomats. The Commission found that the government of Pakistan was not doing enough to protect the religious freedom of its citizens and that certain aspects of Pakistani law not only violate international standards of religious freedom but contribute to an atmosphere antagonistic to the full exercise of religious freedom by many of Pakistan's citizens. Our consideration of religious freedom issues in Pakistan resulted in a set of recommendations (attached) included in our May 1, 2001 annual report. Although conditions in Pakistan have not warranted its designation as a "country of particular concern" under IRFA, it remains on the Commission's "watch list." On January 17 of this year, the Commission publicly welcomed the Musharraf government's action in abolishing the discriminatory system of separate electorates for religious minorities to which we had drawn attention previously because it effectively rendered religious minority members second-class citizens. We have also been encouraged by other actions taken by President Musharraf, both before and after the events of September 11, to foster an atmosphere of religious tolerance in Pakistan and to curb the malevolent influence of violent religious extremists in Pakistani society. The Commission also views with approval the Administration's decision to assist Pakistan's efforts to improve its education system in order to ensure that religious schools are not breeding grounds for the recruitment and training of future terrorists. In view of these and other important new developments in Pakistan and in U.S.-Pakistan relations, we would like to update and summarize the Commission's recommendations to assist you in preparing for the upcoming meeting. The Commission respectfully recommends that in your discussions with President Musharraf you commend him for his efforts to: Overcome the reality of second-class citizenship among Pakistan's non-Muslim citizens by abolishing the discriminatory system of separate electorates; Encourage Islamic religious leaders and scholars to promote religious tolerance in Pakistan; Reform Pakistan's education system to improve the quality of secular education and to ensure that religious schools are not used as training grounds for sectarian violence; and Disarm militant groups engaging in criminal violence out of misguided religious motivations. The Commission further recommends that you urge President Musharraf to: Continue and intensify efforts to prevent sectarian and religiously motivated violence and to punish its perpetrators, including those responsible for the massacre of 15 Christians during church services October 28 at Bahawalpur and for the bombing of a church in Islamabad January 15; Rescind laws that effectively criminalize the public practice of the Ahmadi faith, in violation of the right to freedom of religion and belief guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and end official discrimination against Ahmadis; Implement procedural changes to Pakistan's blasphemy laws in order to limit and eventually eliminate the numerous instances of their wrongful use against members of minority religious communities and Muslims alike (e.g., changes that would require an investigation before arrest can be made and removal of blasphemy offenses from the list of crimes tried by special anti-terrorist courts); Exercise his authority to pardon those condemned to death under the blasphemy laws as a result of miscarriages of justice; and Establish and support mechanisms of interfaith dialogue encompassing all religious communities in Pakistan. Thank you, Mr. President, for considering the Commission's recommendations. Respectfully, Michael K. Young Chair

Michael K. Young, Chair

- Felice D. Gaer Firuz Kazemzadeh Richard D. Land Bishop William Francis Murphy Leila Nadya Sadat Nina Shea The Hon. Charles R. Stith The Hon. Shirin Tahir-Kheli Steven T. McFarland, Executive Director